

Flashback

Ready, Set ...



USAF Photo

Who needs a runway? In the 1950s USAF looked at the capability to launch an aircraft from a flatbed trailer using a rocket booster to get up to flying speed. The zero-length-launch concept actually worked. Initial tests used dummy aircraft, called "iron birds," but successful manned flights were made with both the F-84 and F-100. Here, an F-100, inclined about 20 degrees, used a

Rocketdyne solid rocket booster, which produced 130,000 pounds of thrust for four seconds. At burnout the jet would reach an altitude of about 400 feet at 275 mph—nearly a 4 g ride for the pilot. North American Aviation test pilots made repeated launches, one even from indoors, to prove the idea would work from bunkers.